Introduction to the Special Issue on "Collective Action in Crisis?"

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Abstract

This Introduction to the Special Issue 'Collective Action in Crisis?' explores two key themes. First, it seeks to deepen understanding of how collective action can be organized in crises, connecting established knowledge in the field with new insights from the articles of this Special Issue. Second, the question mark in our guiding theme invites critical reflection on whether the theories we use to understand collective action are themselves in crisis. Through this theme, we propose both a theoretical exploration and an empirical agenda, recognizing that crises amplify foundational concerns in organization studies around problems of collective action. We begin by 'zooming out' to provide an overview of foundational theoretical approaches to collective action during crises. Then, we 'zoom in' and foreground the specific value of middle-range theories and core concepts from organization and management studies. Our aim is to offer conceptual resources for scholars and practitioners tackling the critical task of organizing collective action in crises.

Keywords

Collective action, crisis, organization, institutions, decision making, sense making, practices, routines

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Introduction

Crisis is a watchword of our time: For example, permacrisis was the 2022 Collins dictionary word of the year. Writer David Shariatmadari describes permacrisis as a "term that perfectly embodies the dizzying sense of lurching from one unprecedented event to another, as we wonder bleakly what new horrors might be around the corner.[1]" Permacrisis has not been the only new appearance associated with the term crisis. Others include polycrisis, creeping crisis, or sustained crises. Since at least the turn of the millennium, crisis seems to have entered the *Zeitgeist* for good: the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Global Financial Crisis of 2007/08, the ensuing economic crises, the 2015 refugee crises and displacement more generally, then various political crises (from protest movements, to national political movements, Brexit etc.), geopolitical conflicts and wars, the accelerating climate crisis and, recently, the global COVID19 pandemic. From internet searches to newspaper articles to popular culture and literature, "no word is invoked more to characterize the current era than 'crisis'" (Bures, 2020). It is clear that no single organizational actor possesses sufficient capacities or resources to tackle the complex demands ensuing from the different crises of our times.

From a theoretical perspective, 'collective action' is a concept of defining importance when multiple actors from different socioeconomic sectors and/or governmental levels are called to address concerns that cannot be tackled by any single actor. The foundational question of collective action is "perhaps the central problem of social life" (Mayer, 2014, p. 13): How do people cooperate and coordinate their actions to get things done together? A number of theories have addressed this question from different disciplinary vantage points.

[1] See: https://blog.collinsdictionary.com/language-lovers/a-year-of-permacrisis/ ; see also https://theconversation.com/permacrisis-what-it-means-and-why-its-word-of-the-year-for-2022-194306

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In this special issue, we foreground the contributions of organization theory and explore new ways of conceptualizing collective action in response to crisis. Given the original meaning of the Greek word 'crisis' (which derives from *krínein*; meaning 'to decide') we understand crises not only in their original meaning as low-probability, high-impact events that require decisive actions such as disasters, fires, or earthquakes; but, given current denominations, we additionally include empirical contexts that address organizing under high uncertainty, are extreme in nature, and/or involve wicked problems. To be sure, much foundational and inspiring work has been done to address aspects of collective action in such crisis situations, including literatures on sense-making in crisis (Dwyer, Hardy, & Maguire, 2020; Weick, 1993, 2010), practices of high-reliability teams (Bechky & Okhuysen, 2011; Danner-Schröder & Geiger, 2016), studies in crisis management (Ansell & Boin, 2019; James, Wooten, & Dushek, 2011; Perrow, 1984; Rerup, 2009), decision making in crisis (Janis, 1989; Kornberger, Leixnering, & Meyer, 2019), work in extreme contexts (Bacharach & Bamberger, 2007; Hällgren, Rouleau, & De Rond, 2018; Shepherd & Willians, 2014) or, more recently, discussions on tackling grand challenges (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015).Whilst building on these literatures, in this Special Issue we seek to advance our community's knowledge about organizing collective action in crises, broadly defined, and aim to extend our understanding of possible strategies for their mitigation.

The theme of this Special Issue, 'Collective Action in Crisis?', also implies a theoretical puzzle. The question mark hints at a different reading of our theme – one that questions whether our theories of collective action are themselves in crisis. Our initial call was designed to ask: Are our theories of organizing collective action in crisis sufficient to capture crisis' dynamics and the scope of the challenges? Or does crisis (here revealing its shared roots with critique) expose the limitations of our theories of collective action? Do we need to consider alternative governance modes – beyond markets, hierarchies, or networks –

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and theoretical vocabularies to capture how collective action is organized in situations of crises? With 'Collective Action in Crisis?' we thus propose a theoretical ambition and an empirical agenda, for the pressures of crisis accentuate some of the foundational concerns of the field of organization studies: How do collectives of actors from public, private and third sectors as well as emerging collectives orchestrate collaboration? And how do the collectives mobilize resources, improvise solutions, and strategize under extreme pressure and uncertainty? What supports or hinders collective action? What are the outcomes? The articles in this Special Issue study these questions in several fascinating contexts, using established as well as novel theoretical and conceptual tools to advance our understanding of collective action in crisis.

In this introductory text, we explore links and foster debate between established knowledge streams in our field and the contributions to this Special Issue. Our goal is to provide our community with the contours of a set of resources with which to explore questions of how to organize for collective action in crisis, a topic we believe is of defining importance for our time. We start by 'zooming out' in order to provide an overview of some of the wider theoretical approaches that have laid the foundations for debates around collective action in crises. We then argue for the value of more middle range theories and 'zoom in' on core approaches from organization and management theory and the more granular constructs that represent the source of their explanatory power. We position the papers collected in the Special Issue within this framework and conclude with an outlook on what we see as desiderata for future organizational research.

Theorizing collective action: a short overview over a long debate

Collective action is centrally concerned with how coordination of multiple actors can be accomplished. The question of how collective action may arise has inspired researchers from

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various disciplines, most prominently and influentially from economics, sociology and psychology. They have explored the mechanisms and conditions that facilitate or hinder effective collaboration among diverse actors and groups and examined the impact of social, cultural, and institutional factors on the success of collective efforts.

For one, collective action can be seen through what the philosopher Edna Ullmann-Margalit called 'invisible hand explanations': "By the 'invisible hand process' is meant the aggregate mechanism which takes as 'input' the dispersed actions of the participating individuals and produces as 'outputs' the overall social pattern." (Ullmann-Margalit, 1978, p. 129). One of the most well-known invisible hand explanations is of course Adam Smith's idea of an invisible hand that coordinates market activities of participants. Another example beyond the domain of markets is given by urban theorist Jane Jacobs (1961) who explored how cities work. She argued that many micro-activities – such as shopping or dog walking – have macro-effects, like safety or trust, because it is through dog walking that people come to speak with each other, build social networks and thus create an urban fabric. Order emerges out of individual actions, which are motivated by individual interests. Enlightenment philosopher Adam Ferguson, contemporary of Adam Smith, articulated this idea when he described phenomena that are "the result of human action but not of human design" – an idea that Hayek found so profound that he labelled it "indeed the beginning of social theory" (1978, p. 73 and 264).

Whilst an important idea, invisible hand explanations play a lesser role in theorizing collective action in crisis. Prices, seen as rule-governed feedback mechanisms that do much of the coordination work in markets, do not similarly indicate value(s) in crisis. In fact, crisis can be understood as moment in which the usual order of preferences is suspended, perhaps even upended. Moreover, the order that invisible hand explanations afford are often a function of the distance of the observer to the emerging pattern. From a bird's eye view

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markets might represent order; but from the perspective of the individual actor, they might seem more of a random walk lacking direction, as Hayek (1978, p. 183) admitted: The "market order does not serve a definite order of ends […] it cannot legitimately said to *have* particular ends [… and it] cannot be properly said to have a purpose."

Next to invisible hand explanations, debates between economics and political sciences explore why, how and under what conditions more or less boundedly rational, and more or less self-interested individuals choose to engage in collective action. A key debate about the (im)possibility of collective action evolved around Mancur Olson, Garrett Hardin and Elinor Ostrom. In his *Logic of Collective Action* (1965) Olson suggested that unless a collective is small in numbers or coercion is in place (through the law, for instance) "*rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interest*." (Olson, 1965, p. 2; emphasis in original). The reason for this, he claimed, is that rational individuals will come to the conclusion that they benefit from collective action without contributing to it and will therefore free ride. One of Olson's examples are labour unions engaged in collective bargaining: "the rational worker [has] no incentive to join; his individual efforts would not have a noticeable effect on the outcome, and whether he supported the union or not he would still get the benefits of its achievements." (1965, p. 76).

Hardin's essay on the *Tragedy of the commons* (1968) popularized the argument. Hardin suggests the following thought experiment: Imagine a pasture co-owned by farmers with cows. If too many cows are added, the land will deteriorate and collapse. The conundrum is that each farmer benefits individually by adding another cow while sharing the loss. Thus, rational farmers will keep adding cows until the commons are destroyed. The moral of the story: only state intervention or private property regimes can safeguard the commons. Otherwise, collective action, driven by rational, self-interested, calculating individuals, will lead straight into chaos. In contrast, Ostrom argued that there are many

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examples of successful collective action that respect such commons as individuals learn social norms of reciprocity and "are able to engage in problem solving to increase long-term payoffs, to make promises, to build reputations for trustworthiness, to reciprocate trustworthiness with trust, and to punish those who are not trustworthy [...]." (Ostrom, 1999, p. 507; Ostrom 1990). This long-term collective action is not based on self-interested utility maximizers but on individuals designing institutions and governance regimes that regulate collective action. Ostrom and her collaborators analysed a series of commons (including fisheries, irrigation, knowledge commons …) and distilled "institutional design rules" for collective action. The debate highlighted the possibility of collective action and indeed collective rationality beyond self-interested individual actors. However, many of Ostrom's examples have existed for centuries and presume that common logics and norms of usage have evolved over long time spans. In situations of crisis, such established logics and norms might, however, be challenged.

Inspired by mass psychology and crowd behaviour (theorized by Le Bon, 1895, and Canetti, 1960; see Kornberger, 2022), approaches anchored in psychology and more recently in behavioral economics focus on what motivates and incentivizes individuals to become involved in collective action. Collective action approaches rooted in social psychology depart from individualistic utility arguments and highlight factors such as social identity, perceptions of relative deprivation and injustice, or beliefs in the efficacy of action as predictors. A combined model (e.g., Duncan, 2018) has become especially relevant for some social movement theories that draw on structured dynamics around social identity and in that way aim to explain how, when and whom social movements can mobilize for collective activism.

Pioneering this work, Herbert Blumer described the reciprocal process between individuals and collectives as a "type of inter-stimulation wherein the response of one

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individual reproduces the stimulation that has come from another individual and in being reflected back to this individual reinforces the stimulation." (1951, p. 170). Literature within social movement theory developed the notion of how collective identities and simultaneously collective action frames evolve to explain how this reciprocal relation unfolds. Collective action frames link individual identity and motivation to collective identity and causes. If Olson found it irrational for the worker to join the fight of the unions, Melucci argued that joining the fight is not a matter of rational cost-benefit analysis; joining happens because it is 'meaningful': "In collective action, the construction of identity assumes the character of a process that must be constantly activated if action is to be possible." (1996, p. 67). These social identity-based explanations of collective action are a much-welcomed addition of theorizing the motives for collective action. However, be it with social identities or in collective action frames, these explanations somehow still seem to presuppose the existence of a collective rather than explaining how it comes about.

These three classic approaches to collective action— rooted in economics, political science and psychology for the most part—aim to offer theoretical systems that are coherent and provide broadly generalizable explanations of the social world, often referred to as 'grand theories'. However, organization research that studies collective action in crisis has in comparison often been following Robert Merton's call for problem and phenomenon-driven middle-range theories. Merton (1949) describes middle-range theories as those that bridge the gap between minor working hypotheses and all-encompassing unified grand theories. These theories are intermediate to general theories of social systems and detailed descriptions of particulars. Middle-range theories involve abstractions but are still close enough to observed data to allow for empirical examination. They allow researchers to address specific problems and phenomena, such as around crises, and to develop more nuanced and contextually relevant explanations of collective action.

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In this spirit, the next section zooms in on research of collective action in the field of organization studies, where a mosaic of approaches and theories, all at the middle range, comes to the fore. These theories draw on and combine different elements from the foundational approaches and governance modes discussed above, such as identities, institutions, or rationality in decision-making. They explore 'how' and 'under which conditions' organizing collective action in historically and culturally contextualized situations of crisis occurs. These approaches offer more situated and empirically grounded explanations of specific patterns, mechanisms and conditions that facilitate or hinder collaboration, taking into account the unique social, cultural, and institutional dynamics at play. Thus, they provide more fine-grained approaches to understanding the complexities of collective action in organizational settings in and during crisis.

Zooming in: Organizing collective action in crisis

In our pursuit to outline a set of theoretical resources for studying collective action in crisis, this section delves into various middle range theories. First, we consider core approaches in organization theory on collective action in crisis and relate them to contributions from this Special Issue. In a second step we rehearse recent debates that foreground the importance of paying closer attention to nuances and differences between research contexts, the commitment of researchers to their context, and the ethical implications of studying different crises contexts.

Sketching a map for collective action in crisis

From within the field of organization studies, we highlight four core theoretical approaches that have evolved and shed light on collective action in crisis. We do not wish to imply that these are the only angles from which organizing collective action in crisis has been studied

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but these are amongst the most prominent ones over the last few decades, as the papers in this Special Issue attest as well, including institutional theory, sensemaking, decision-making, and routines. We cluster them as distinct approaches but want to emphasize that they are in conversation with each other and overlap conceptually and empirically. On the next pages we will present these four approaches in more detail and anchor the articles in this Special Issue within them.

Institutional theory perspective.

Institutional theory is one of the main perspectives from which collective action in crises has been theorized in organization and management studies. Institutions are, according to Berger and Luckmann (1967), reciprocal typifications of actions and actors. Institutions are at work whenever types of actors perform or are expected to perform types of scripted activities as a part of their specific social and professional roles. Firefighters, police, medical staff, or EA paramedics are good examples (see Cros, Tiberghien, & Bertolucci, 2025, or Dacin & Kent, 2025, both in this issue). While institutions are enacted by individuals or collectives, they are core building blocks of the fabric of the social world and of social order. Crises, in turn, oftentimes signal the breakdown of institutions: Taken-for-granted flows of action are interrupted and typified interactions break down. At the same time, a collective's capacity to deal with crises rests, to a considerable extent, upon existing institutionalized infrastructures and mostly involves the engagement of institutionalized types of actors who enact institutionalized role identities (e.g., fire fighters, paramedics, rescue teams; health care workers) for whom individuals' crises often are routine operations (such as the firefighters in the study of Cros et al., 2025). When institutions themselves are in crisis, existing types of actors and/or ingrained roles distributions between them are challenged. In this sense, an institutional perspective on collective action in crisis also draws attention to the question of

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actorhood (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Hwang & Colyvas, 2020), that is: who is legitimated to participate in decision-making, who plays which role in the course of action, who is legitimate to speak on behalf of those that do not have voice – future generations or non-human constituents such as animals, the ocean, or the planet. Inequalities and divisions that are built into and perpetuated through societal institutions are also frequently the source for crises or aggravate their impacts.

Scholars who work within the institutionalist research tradition have used different angles and concepts from the theory's toolbox for their contributions. This toolbox is partly composed of a varied and rich combination of elements found in the three more foundational theoretical approaches reviewed above. For instance, themes such as institutional arrangements and infrastructure, norms, values, and legitimacy speak to the Olsen – Ostrom debate mentioned above; role identities are part of the institutionalized typifications and imply reciprocity and social identity. Tool-kit approaches to institutional logics are sometimes closing the gap to rational choice approaches in economics, and, overemphasized taken-for-grantedness arguments echo the invisible hand explanations reviewed earlier.

One vibrant strand of inquiry asks how collaboration among different actor groups works and how collective action can be forged, stabilized, and become part of the institutional infrastructure or is blocked by existing institutions. Work on multistakeholder initiatives and cross-sector partnerships highlights the impact of power asymmetries on the propensity to collaborate (Gray & Purdy, 2018), discusses the possibility for scaling solutions or the impacts of governance fault-lines (Leixnering, Jancsary, Ayrault, Gehman, et al., 2025), or proposes strategies for how distributed activities from a variety of actors may facilitate collective robust action (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015). Frey-Heger, Gatzweiler, & Hinings (2022), for example, focus on transnational institutions which are set up to enable collective responses to cross-boundary wicked problems such as forced

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displacement, climate change, or pandemics. In their study of the transnational regime for refugee protection in camps in Rwanda, the authors discover distributed and mutually reinforcing dissociative mechanisms through which these regimes turn into institutional barriers that constrain collective action and, thus, hinder appropriate responses and actually intensify the wicked problem they are meant to alleviate. Collective action in the face of crisis is thus rather precarious because of the multiple institutional logics that actors employ. Different institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012) result from actors enacting social roles from different institutional orders such as bureaucracy, family, or different professions. These logics prompt different frames of reference and ways actors make sense of the situation they find themselves in and different assumptions as to what is an appropriate course of action and which role identity to enact. While crises are collective events, individuals deal with disruptions to their professional role identities in different ways, dismissing or integrating such collective disruptions into their own personal growth narratives (Kent & Dacin, 2025).

Institutional pluralism, that is the co-existence of multiple institutional logics, is a double-edged sword with regard to collective action in crises. On the one hand, institutional complexity resulting from competing logics may spur breakdowns and be one of the reasons for crises to occur in the first place or may jeopardize collaboration in the attempts to respond. On the other hand, a pluralism of logics nurtures and facilitates dispersed sense- and decision making. Research emphasizes that institutional plurality and the multivocality and ambiguity that it creates may be an asset when it comes to inclusive responses to the most pressing challenges of our time (Ferrero, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015; Gümüsay, Claus, & Amis, 2020) and towards overcoming voids in existing governance regimes (Mair, Marti, & Ventresca, 2012). Ansari, Wijen, and Gray (2013), for instance, study how the climate crisis could be mitigated in transnational fields. They identify mechanisms through which actors'

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competing logics can be overcome. The emergence of a hybrid commons logic, so the authors argue, enables the avoidance of the tragedy of the commons. Klitsie, Ansari, and Volberda (2018) argue for "optimal plurality" that is conducive to sustaining collaboration. It enables the integration of multiple role identities, interests, and logics and "requires parties to manage or tolerate multiple overlapping, conflicting, interstitial, or even unrelated meanings drawn from different sectors in the interest of getting work done" (2018, p. 402). Indeed, in the absence of institutional pluralism organizations that aim at alleviating the detrimental impacts of crises, such as refugee camps, may, as Musa (2023) argues, evolve into a Goffmanesque total institution (see also the study of Frey-Heger et al. 2022).

Research that mobilizes the concept of institutional work focuses for its part on the purposeful efforts of individuals and organizations to create, maintain, or disrupt institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). A good example is the article by Barin Cruz, Aguilar Delgado, Leca, and Gond (2015). The authors point out how institutional work enables resilience of fragile institutions in the extreme context of disaster response (in their study, the Haitian earthquake of 2020). Another excellent example is the work of Kodeih, Schildt, and Lawrence (2022) that shows how local "sheltering work" can alleviate the oppressive effects of life in refugee camps in Lebanon. Lefsrud & Meyer's (2012) analysis of the frames and claims-making of professional engineers and geoscientists in Alberta on the other hand reveals their defensive institutional work aimed at stabilizing the status quo and preventing regulation in the face of the climate crisis. The key role of emotions in mobilizing collective action is pointed out by Wright, Zammuto, and Liesch (2017) study of how specialists in an emergency department of a hospital work towards institutional maintenance or Farny, Kibler, Hai, and Landoni (2019) research into how actors engage in institutional creation work in disaster recovery.

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Collective Sensemaking in crisis

Sensemaking is a process where individuals, groups or entire organizations construct or reconstruct an understanding of the situations in which they find themselves as a basis for their actions. As a process, the search for, and active (re)making of sense, typically results from happenings or events that 'cue' or 'signal' a break from prior or default understandings. Crises, such as the COVID pandemic (Christianson & Barton, 2021; Stephens et al., 2020) or the European refugee crisis (Van der Giessen, Langenbusch, Jacobs, & Cornelissen, 2022) are prototypical events that break with the ordinary or routine. For the people and organizations involved, crises are often unprecedented, complex, emotionally taxing, hard to interpret and full of possibilities of how things may play out. Yet, at the same time, they cannot stall, and 'safe inaction' is often not an option (Weick, 1988), as many crisis episodes generally ask for a time-sensitive, organized and resilient response. Faced with this gap between their own understanding and the need for coordinated and immediate action, individuals and collectives try to figure out 'what is going on here?' and 'What do I/we do next?' (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

Given this general predicament of crises, past research on crisis sensemaking has not surprisingly focused on recording and explaining instances of sensemaking failure, where individuals or groups were either not able to create a coherent sense and take coordinated action in time (e.g., Weick, 1993), or alternatively committed themselves to a course of action that seemingly made sense but ultimately proved to be a failure (e.g., Cornelissen, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014). Commitment to certain sensemaking accounts or typifications of the situation that are formed in flight (Weick, 2022) is, as past research has shown (Weick, 1988; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) often the cause of such failure: joint commitments to some shared understanding is necessary for any coordinated action to take place, yet, at the same time, it harbours the potential for error when it leads to more decisive, singular and

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potentially irreversible actions (Weick, 1988; Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). When any formed commitments have additionally been made 'public', it may lead individuals or groups to more strongly justify the interpretations they have formed as 'rationalizing accounts' (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) to themselves and others during the process, potentially blinding themselves to alternative understandings (as an 'escalation of commitment') (Weick, 1988).

Besides instances of sensemaking failure, past research has also recorded cases where collective sensemaking proved to be successful in addressing the crisis (see Cros et al., 2025). Initially, work documented structural and cultural elements of organizations (in NASA, on flight deck carriers, in emergency response units) that fostered such 'heedful interrelating' (Weick & Roberts, 1993) including flexible rules and routines, a deference to expertise on the ground (rather than hierarchical command) and a culture that fosters experimentation and allows for mistakes and failure (Weick, 1987; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). More recently, research has focused on patterns of improvisation by which collectives are able to adjust their sense of an evolving crisis in real time (Faraj & Xiao, 2006) and creatively combine existing action repertoires into a successful and resilient response (Bechky & Okhuysen, 2011; Lübcke, Steigenberger, Wilhelm, & Maurer, 2024). Notable in these successful examples of sensemaking and improvisation is the ability of the collective to not fix their presuppositions or thoughts too quickly or too firmly, but to remain provisional (as opposed to committed) in their attitude towards their initial interpretations and adopt an experimental, or mindful, orientation towards their actions throughout (Lübcke et al., 2024); effectively 'testing' whether further cues validate the sense made or instead trigger a revision of the entire sensemaking process and a search for an alternative understanding and response instead.

Given the nature of crises as 'cosmology episodes' (Weick, 1993) in which the whole gamut of human experience, interpretation and action plays out and "human situations are

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progressively clarified" (Weick, 1995, p. 11), they are vehicles for constantly new angles on crisis sensemaking. That is, crises can be approached and unfolded with ever more different qualifications and extensions to sensemaking being brought in, such as around the role of emotions (Van der Giessen et al., 2022), multimodality (Lübcke et al., 2024), temporality (Hernes & Obstfeld, 2022; Kateb, Kroon, van Burg, & Ruehle, 2025, this issue), processes of voice and silence (Cros et al., 2025) and space (Steigenberger & Lübcke, 2022). Indeed, with the body of work on crisis sensemaking developing in this way, sensemaking itself has become somewhat of a meta-theory or umbrella concept (of phenomenological 'being-in-the-world', see Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020) that links different research interests and motivations, and subsumes an ever-broader range of theoretical claims, distinctions and qualifications (leading to neologisms as well such as 'sensebreaking', sensehiding', and 'senselistening', Cros et al., 2025). This highlights that sensemaking symbolizes the advantages but also the acute challenges of middle-range theorizing. On the one hand, and as compared to grand theoretical abstractions or overly stylized or simplifying (formal) theoretical frameworks, sensemaking is clearly phenomenon-led and attentive to organizing processes in their situated and varying circumstances, such that it allows researchers to make ever more fine-grained distinctions. On the other hand, at this middle-range level, it also seems to create an ever-expansive theoretical universe (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020) that, however loose, subsumes all and everything and tries to hold on to as much as possible (across papers) to grasp and express the richness and flow of social reality itself. In this sense, sensemaking research has also harked back to foundational theoretical approaches, incorporating motivations for collective action around (social) identity, classic behavioural tendencies and (utility) maxims, and systemic notions of power (see, e.g., Schildt, Mantere, & Cornelissen, 2020)

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Decision-making

Questions of decision-making provide a further piece to the mosaic of how collective action in crisis has been theorized in organization studies. Decision-making is central conceptual element in the three theoretical approaches reviewed above. The debate has revolved around the rationality of the decision-making process, its boundedness and what the causes of its limitations are (Simon, 1947; March, 1991; March & Simon, 1958). For instance, the "logic of appropriateness" suggests that decision-makers are influenced by norms, values and past experiences rather than rational search for optimal outcomes (March & Olsen, 2015). Mid-range theorizing in organization studies has contributed insightful research to this conversation. We can distill three specific modes of decision making in the literature.

Criticizing rational choice theory in which decision-making has been cast as calculation that weighs the costs and benefits of specific options, scholars such as Karl Weick (1993) and – building on Nobel laureate Herbert Simon's (1956) work on bounded rationality and satisficing that criticized economics' rational choice paradigm as unrealistic – James March (1982, 1994) argued for a more contextual, situated understanding of how decision making unfolds. In their analysis of a friendly fire accident, the already above quoted Karl Weick and his colleagues argued:

> I could have asked, "Why did they decide to shoot?" However, such a framing puts us squarely on a path that leads straight back to the individual decision maker, away from potentially powerful contextual features and right back into the jaws of the fundamental attribution error. "Why did they decide to shoot?" quickly becomes "Why did they make the wrong decision?" Hence, the attribution falls squarely onto the shoulders of the decision maker and away from potent situation factors that influence action. Framing the individual-level puzzle as a question of meaning rather than deciding shifts the emphasis away from individual decision makers toward a point somewhere "out there" where context and individual action overlap. Such a reframing—from decision making to sensemaking—opened my eyes to the possibility that, given the circumstances, even I could have made the same "dumb mistake." This disturbing revelation, one that I was in no way looking for, underscores the importance of initially framing such senseless tragedies as "good people struggling to make sense," rather than as "bad ones making poor decisions. (Weick et al., 2005: 410)

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This foundational critique at decision making in crisis inspired not only sensemaking theory and provided a link to institutional theory (see sections above) but also led to more organizational, sociological and critical conceptualizations of decision making. March (1982, 1994) introduced the 'logic of appropriateness' as decision making mode in which actors build on a shared identity, history and experience to arrive at decisions. Following this logic, decisions 'happen' as actors go through the questions of: 'What kind of situation is this? What kind of person am I? What does a person such as I do in a situation such as this?' This focus on recognition and identity – and not a rational choice analysis – lead to decision rules and subsequent action. The logic of appropriateness is based on shared repertoires and institutionalized roles that evolve over time as March and Olson suggested. According to them, actors "seek to fulfil the obligations encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices and expectations of its institutions. Embedded in a social collectivity, they do what they see as appropriate for themselves in a specific type of situation." (March & Olson, 2015, p. 478). Thus, standard operating procedures, manuals and routines (see below) play an all-important role in organizing decision making during crisis (Danner-Schröder & Geiger, 2016; Wolbers & Boersma, 2013). For example, Klein analysed how a firefighter commander made decisions during a fire. Klein (1999: 17) suggested that based on experience, the commander was able to read the situation as 'example of a prototype' and then decide rapidly on the appropriate course of action. Klein calls this strategy "recognition-primed decision making" (Klein, 1999, p. 17). This "recognition-primed decision making" is based on being able to read cues of a situation as typical and then relate it to possible expectations, likely outcomes and typical action (see Cros et al, 2025).

A further example is the study by Kendra and Wachtendorf (2006) on the waterborne evacuation of lower Manhattan after the 9/11 terror attack. The authors explain that collective

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action of individual boat owners right after the attack was enabled through the tugboat operators, yacht owners, ferry captains, waterfront workers etc. shared experience and ability to understand skills and read cues of each other. Identity facilitated the distributed coordination during crisis (see also Treurniet & Wolbers, 2021).

Developing a third position on decision-making in crisis, work on the 2015 refugee crisis theorized the 'logic of tact' as decision making mode. This concept describes how "managers to sustain their capacity to make decisions and act collectively even when there is no shared set of rules to fall back on nor a calculable future to draw upon." (Kornberger et al., 2019, p. 258). The logic of tact goes beyond the logic of consequences and a logic of appropriateness as they rely on knowable future or a shared past. Weickian sensemaking assumes that actors share scripts and know how role identities pattern decision making. The notion of tact "shows the dynamic interplay" between a logic of consequences and a logic of appropriateness: "neither is cognition ahead of action, nor is action ahead of cognition; rather, tact explicates the rapid switching and mutual constitution of thought and action, and how this interplay (...) orchestrates decision-making during crisis." (Kornberger et al., 2019, p. 260). This line of inquiry opens decision making processes that are more fluid processes and consider materiality, temporality and change. For instance, recent work by Burke, Omidvar, Spanellis, and Pyrko (2023) on decision making of collectives during the Covid pandemic highlighted the materiality and the interplay of "spatial co-presence" and "temporal simultaneity" working together to produce choice mediated in and through digital spaces and architectures.

Routines for collective action in crisis

Collective action in crisis often relies on carefully established sets of routines, such as trauma protocols in hospitals (Faraj & Xiao, 2006) or firefighter's standard operating procedures

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(Geiger, Danner-Schröder, & Kremser, 2021). Research on routines has differentiated between two prominent patterns of action that emerge from such careful routine work: stability *and* change (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; 2008; Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002; Howard-Grenville, 2005).

Routines may indeed provide an important sense of stability in crisis situations especially when previously uncoordinated sets of actors get together at the onset of a crisis. At the same time, routines enable flexible adaptation in response to dynamic crisis trajectories (Danner-Schröder & Geiger, 2016; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Schakel, van Fenema, & Faraj, 2016). Geiger and Harborth (2025, in this issue) build on and extend such line of argumentation, emphasizing that collectives often rely on clusters of routines for reliable action, and at the same time outline how unexpected events can be accommodated when coordinating these clusters. In a similar vein, Cros and colleagues (2025) detail how firefighters flexibly adjusted to the Notre-Dame de Paris fire by going beyond their standard operating procedures. Their study captures the main turning point that saved Notre-Dame de Paris from total destruction, specifying how senselistening enabled a more flexible and modified use of existing routines into improvised actions.

While routines are crucial to navigate collectives during crisis, crisis themselves often disrupt existing organizational routines and give rise to new ones (Sele, Danner-Schröder, and Mahringer, 2024), including new digital work routines in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kateb et al., 2025) or professional roles and routines following the 2003 Toronto SARS outbreak (Kent & Dacin, 2025).

From a critical perspective, an understanding of routines also helps to examine how well-intended routines may become implicated in reproducing today's societal problems (Feldman & Pentland, 2022) or in prolonging crisis situations (Geiger & Harborth, 2025). Importantly, a critical perspective on routines allows to explain how sustained crises may

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indeed be the result of human action but not of human design. Well-intended routines to foster temporal alignment between actors, for instance, are shown to reproduce and prolong refugee crises (Frey-Heger, Gatzweiler, & Hinings, 2022). While temporal alignment may be an important feature of routine coordination, such a critical perspective sheds light on the unintended consequences that may emerge as collectives engage in routine work. Geiger and Harborth (2025) introduce the important notion of 'temporal manipulation' to navigate multiple routines during collective action in crisis in order to pre-empt routines from resulting in prolonged and sustained crisis situations.

Contextualizing collective action in crisis

Organizational scholarship has not only offered nuanced theoretical insights into the problems of how to organize for collective action in crisis. Recently, and in the spirit of problem- and phenomenon-driven middle-range theorizing, organizational research has paid more detailed attention to research contexts and the differences that shape collective organizational responses. These approaches are important as they offer contextually relevant and empirically grounded explanations of specific patterns, mechanisms and conditions that facilitate or hinder collective action, taking into account existing themes in the research we discussed above – from institutional approaches to sensemaking and from decision-making to routines. While broadly pertinent for our field as a whole, we highlight streams of literature that are particularly relevant for the theme of our Special Issue: debates in extreme context research, and work on the importance of temporality and place.

Extreme context research

With a shared interest in organizational responses to crises and high-risk events, extreme contexts relate to settings "where one or more extreme events are occurring or are

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likely to occur that may exceed the organization's capacity to prevent and result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to—or in close physical or psychosocial proximity to—organization members" (Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio & Cavarretta, 2009, p. 898). Interest in settings where such dynamics can be observed have sparked the curiosity of organizational scholars for decades, focusing on different organizational concerns from decision-making (see Anderson, 1983) to coordination (Argote, 1982). Linking to and critiquing institutional approaches, Clegg, Kornberger, and Rhodes (2005) emphasize that studying extremes is crucial. They argue that disruptions to normalcy and taken-for-granted assumptions are not deviations from the norm but regular, predictable occurrences. Yet, for long such debates have remained largely disjointed and long struggled to integrate meaningful commonalities.

A notable achievement of extreme context research has been to offer a typology to make sense of the contextual commonalities and differences for researchers exploring such settings. For example, Hallgren, de Rond, and Rouleau (2017) distinguish between extreme contexts emerging because of radical disruptions like terrorist attacks or school shootings, challenges presented by emergencies such as the ones that firefighters and other emergency response units train for, and settings that pose an inherent high risk that may or may not materialize, including aircraft carrier flight decks or high-altitude mountaineering. Important recent advances have been made in several areas of extreme context research. For example, the role of emotions features prominently in recent work. Rauch and Ansari (2024) show how silence can be an important coping mechanism for medical professional working in war zones to control their emotions and continue performing their tasks (see also Wright, Kent, Hällgren & Rouleau, 2023). Using a routines approach, Danner-Schröder and Geiger (2016) show how routines can not only foster stability but can also be a source of flexibility and mindfulness in

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a catastrophe management organization. Such works constitute just two notable examples of recent research on extreme contexts.

It could be argued that all articles in this Special Issue deal with extreme contexts in one way or another. Two papers in our special issue explicitly connect to and extend debates on extreme contexts by foregrounding the role of deep contextual familiarity as an important enabler for collective action in crisis. Karam, DeJordy, Creed, Daouk-Öyry, Scott, Geha, and Daou (2025, in this issue) explore the extreme context of Lebanon following the Beirut port blast of 2020. Their setting is characterised by unique circumstances: an acute emergency caused by the port blast and a creeping crisis with endemic state failure at the same time. By studying a grassroots group of scholar-activists, the authors show how collective action was made possible by deeply contextual enablers: a shared sense of suffering and oppression that served as a resource to collectively demand and strive for social change. Instead of drawing from pre-existing routines or processes, market logics, state or community institutions, a long dormant but deeply embodied history of suffering became the key resource that could be activated for collective action by the activists. Karam and colleagues (2025) thus show us how shared embodied suffering became a central enabler for collective action in the face of a creeping crisis. Deep contextual familiarity also played an important role in the response to the Notre Dame fire. Cros and colleagues (2025) explore how an awareness of the national symbolic importance of Notre Dame induced a particular sense of mission and caution in the fire brigades responding to the complex fire. For the authors the ability to listen mindfully to emerging cues from others was a core enabling factor allowing for collective reorientation during the dynamically unfolding events. These two papers from our special issue powerfully speak to the contextual nuances and sensitivities needed to study collective action in such extreme crisis contexts.

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The temporal complexity of collective action in crisis

Collective action in crisis is often characterized by specific temporal dynamics that hinder or facilitate the collective organizing of actors during a crisis situation. In the past, much of the temporality literature has focused on personal experiences with time, including timing norms or temporal leadership (Ancona, Goodman, Lawrence, & Tushman, 2001). The temporal complexity significantly increases on a collective level and in crisis situations.

On the one hand, collective organizing is already challenging enough due to diverse temporal orientations subscribed to by the different sets of actors (Kornberger, Leixnering, & Meyer, 2019). While time may be a "means for collective orientation" (Elias in Hernes, 2022, p. 61), recent research has emphasized the challenges of working collectively despite different temporal orientations, referring to intertemporal tensions between company units (Slawinski & Bansal, 2015), different temporal assumptions (Adam, 2000) or the colliding of times across different fields (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015). Collective action is often contingent upon the ability of actors to bridge or align their different temporal orientations, and find ways of multitemporality (Stjerne, Wenzel, & Svejenova, 2022).

On the other hand, today's crisis situations feature a variety of different temporal horizons and unique temporal demands (Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2024; Frey-Heger et al., 2021; Weeks, 2007). Crises have long been characterized by an acute demand to urgency (Ansell & Boin, 2019; Weeks, 2007), such as in the case of firefighters' attempts to 'get ahead of time' (Geiger et al., 2021). However, many of today's crisis situations pose multiple temporal demands, including both an urgency to act now, and the need to deal with sustained crisis or creeping crises over time. This leads to high levels of "crisis-induced uncertainty" (Ansell & Boin, 2019, p. 1079).

The combination of collective action *and* crisis escalates these temporal complexities. Several papers in this Special Issue extend understanding of these temporal complexities and

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offer novel attempts of supporting collective action despite such temporal challenges. Taking into account both the Eigenzeit of the collective and the Eigenzeit of the crisis, Kateb and colleagues (2025) show how temporal urgency may spur new collective action while at the same time disrupting exisiting collective action initiatives. An awareness of these respective Eigenzeiten can help to understand changes in co-dependence or alignment of collectives. Geiger & Harborth (2025) likewise extend this debate by focusing on sustained crisis, arguing that tolerating temporal conflicts is essential to enabling flexible coordination of collectives. They offer the concept of temporal manipulation, suggesting that "manipulating time, rather than aligning it, can be an effective means of coordination in sustained crises." (p. 1). Kent and Dacin (2025) take a longitudinal perspective and focus on post-crisis narratives. For their part, Karam and colleagues, (2025) use the notion of creeping crisis to detail the interplay of creeping crisis with the agency of collectives, arguing that creeping crisis requires a particular embodied process to support ongoing collective action despite high levels of chronic inertia and distrust. These papers thus untangle the complex temporal interplay between collectives and crisis, highlighting the importance of aligning, or manipulating time, and the unique temporal demands of collective action during sustained and creeping crises.

Place(s) and collective action in crisis

Students of collective action have emphasized the significance of places where individuals engage with social life. Research in geography (Cresswell, 2014; Tuan, 1977), sociology (Castells, 2012; Gieryn, 2000), and philosophy (Heidegger, 1993) has advanced the understanding of place as the intersection of physical location and meaning structure. Building on this foundation, recent research on place within organization studies has

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expanded significantly, offering important new insights into collective action in crisis situations.

Collective organizing is profoundly shaped by, and has the potential to shape, the places where it is embedded through placemaking (Fernández et al., 2017; Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2022), whether these places are physical, digital, or narrated. For example, recent work on social movements that emerged after 2008, such as the Arab Spring and those following the financial crisis, shows how actors combined their presence on Internet social networks with the occupation of highly symbolic places in cities like Cairo, Madrid, and New York. This combination fostered and nurtured the production of narratives of rage and hope (Castells, 2012; Reinecke & Ansari, 2021). Such moves towards more polymorphic approaches to place (Dacin, Zilber, Cartel, & Kibler, 2024), which somewhat background physicality, have allowed for the exploration of how imagined and narrated places interact with physical and digital layers of places and how this shapes collective action (Burke et al., 2023). These recent developments involve a comprehensive re-imagining and integration of elements from the foundational theoretical approaches reviewed earlier. This includes institutional arrangements and infrastructure rooted in economics, as well as work on free and relational spaces derived directly from research on social movements. However, such polymorphic views of place also reflect a shift away from more generalizable explanations of the social world to more nuanced and contextually relevant explanations of collective action.

Relatedly, focusing on collective action within and across different layers of place invites exploration of how places are experienced, lived, sensed, and (re)imagined (Tuan, 1977). Viewing place as dynamic and ever-changing (Cresswell, 2014) prompts consideration of how today's crises challenge the fundamental structures of human relatedness: space and time, social relations, and collective action (Rosa, 2013). These crises may do so progressively or disruptively (Massey, 1995). Scholars like Jane Jacobs and Elijah Anderson

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have shown how specific places shape interactions and can alleviate or exacerbate social issues like crime, education, and polarization. This line of work highlights how robust social infrastructure might help cope with challenges like extreme climate events (Klinenberg, 2018), eviction epidemics (Desmond, 2016), and migration crises (Kornberger et al., 2018). The meanings of the places we inhabit affect collective action, expanding our understanding of it in crises.

Two of the papers in our special issue explicitly address these recent developments and powerfully highlight the importance of place(s) in shaping collective action during crisis. situations. Kateb and colleagues (2025) show how the decision to convert sports halls into emergency shelters for homeless people facilitated collective organizing by creating a steering committee where different organizations could align their temporal structures. The re-signification of a place—a sports hall—served to activate collective action. In the case of Cros and colleagues' (2025) study of Notre Dame, it was the burning of *that* cathedral that opened up a space for collective action through senselistening. Although the behavior of the fire was known to the firefighters, and the normal response would have been to let the building collapse, the symbolic value of the place together with the autonomy of local actors (described as "free electrons" in the paper), led to the interpretation of appropriate clues that reoriented ongoing actions. They decided to do their best to save the building.

Beyond the Special Issue

The purpose of this Special Issue is to explore the intersection of crisis and collective action – we wanted to deepen our understanding of how collective action unfolds in crisis situations. This is inspired by the current state of crises worldwide, be it permacrises, poly-crises, or increasingly sustained crises. Inaction in crisis situations is not an option, and crises often give rise to new patterns of human action. The question mark in our title therefore also

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invited critical reflections about whether the theories we use to understand collective action patterns still hold in today's crisis situations, or if they are themselves in crisis. To explore this question, we invited our community to share their research. Our Call-for-Papers was intentionally broad in purpose – both collective action and crisis can be many different things, as the articles published here attest to. In that sense, the Special Issue is reflective of the current crisis state and of the potential of organizational theories to nuance our understanding of collective action *in* crisis.

Inspired by the empirical and theoretical breadth of the articles gathered here, we zoomed out to revisit 'grand theories' from economics, sociology and psychology most prominently used to elucidate collective action. But while grand theories of collective action are important, they often lack the required nuance to explore how specific crisis situations shape collective action. Zooming in on organizational theories, at the middle-range level, allowed us to provide a set of analytical concepts and theoretical approaches that situate collective action in different crisis contexts, paying attention to the specific institutions, local sensemaking, the underlying decision-making processes or routines, as well as the place, extreme nature and temporal complexity of collective action in crisis. At the same time, middle-range theories come themselves with certain limitations. The danger of middle-range theorizing is that we increasingly know more about less: we might create contextual familiarity and detailed information about a specific crisis but lack an understanding of the implications for collective action patterns more generally.

What does this imply for our contributions to knowledge? How can we accumulate knowledge when the theories become ever more fine-grained and context-specific? As Geertz once commented, there is no "standing on the shoulders of giants" in social science, but a forever increasing differentiation in conceptual granularity. We see this Special Issue as an important part of this conceptual enrichment and continuing refinement but also as an attempt

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to highlight common lines of arguments across theoretical approaches and to invite and encourage cross-fertilization. We did not reach final answers as such, but the Special Issue validated a shared concern that collective organizing in crisis is of utmost importance across our scholarly community. Reflecting this importance, we received a high number of submissions and realized that many scholars across different scholarly communities study how collective action unfolds in crisis situations. Bringing them together and validating a shared communal concern may encourage other scholars to further pursue their research on similar approaches and topics to further build and accumulate knowledge.

Finally, our Special Issue also revealed some interesting blind spots, which warrant further research in their own right. Based on the articles gathered, collective action is in theory and practice the modus operandi to respond to crisis. At the same time, we know from prior research that collective action is also incredibly time-consuming, resource-intensive and may risk distancing actors from the underlying problem (Couture, Jarzabkowski, & Lê, 2023; Frey-Heger et al., 2022). Future research could pay more attention to a greater variety of collection action dynamics, including false starts or collection action patterns that fizzle out at some point, or take a turn in a different direction. By the same token, future research may also focus to a greater extent on the risks, or unintended consequences, of collective action especially in situations of crisis, and examine how actors balance the potential of organizing collectively with such risks. In addition, the core approaches that we outlined above, as well as the featured articles in this issue do not exhaustively cover the full gamut of ways in which the broader topic can be studied. For example, more strongly technological or socio-material approaches seem somewhat underrepresented here and future research may as such elaborate with greater detail the ways in which any form of collective action is entangled with digital technologies, material artifacts and sites of action that bring a distributed aggregation of individuals together as a collective. Likewise, the articles in the issue are for the most part

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studies that are based on qualitative, interpretive methods using grounded theory, narrative or process analytic methods. As part of this genre, they showcase interesting novel ways in which methodologically collective action can be studied, tracked and interpreted with such methods, and in ways that recognize the ethics and politics of such endeavours (see also de Rond, 2020). Karam et al. (2025), for example, reflect deeply on their own 'subject position' in the case they studied; accounting for their involvement in the studied case, the toll it took on them as a research team, as well as their care and concern for those they studied and helped. They also offer a rare example of how scholarly activism and an applied, action research focus towards making change can be combined with a rich multi-level, processual analysis (Karam et al., 2025). Even so, and despite the strengths and richness of the methods in the articles collected here, there is ample space for further methodological innovation and developments, not only around the ethics and politics of crisis and collection research, but also around other promising methods not featured here; including (but not limited to) mixed methods designs, computational and text analyses, as well as archival and qualitative studies that feature analytical processes that are more specifically geared towards multi-level and processual dynamics over time.

As we write these lines, just a few months after Trump's election, it appears there is a significant departure from post–Cold War norms and the established international order, despite its inherent flaws. Efforts to combat climate change and various forms of inequality, driven by both individual and collective actors, are increasingly at a standstill. This stagnation exacerbates the vulnerability of many who were already in precarious positions. Is this an open call for more collective action to address the myriad crises these disruptions may be unfolding? We certainly hope so, but only time will tell.

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